Constructing Identity or Diluting Spirit?

Evaluating the Rise of Kirat Manghim Temples in Nepal.

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Constructing Identity or Diluting Spirit? Evaluating the Rise of Kirat Manghim Temples in Nepal.

Abstract

The construction of large Manghim temples in Nepal has brought about a new change that highlights the identity of the Kirat community religiously and culturally. These temples have attempted to restore Kirat religion in a society of Hindu-Buddhist influence. However, there are some concerns that such plans could undermine the nature-based, flexible and original Mundhum tradition.

This study, based on Yuma Manghim in Dhankuta, Larumba Ashram in Ilam and Dimalung Memorial Park in Bhojpur, raises three major questions: (1) What is the difference from the natural Mundhum tradition of temples and rituals? (2) How has the tourism economy affected traditional practices? (3) What is the role of politics and foreign cooperation in the construction of the temple?

The facts are contradictory. Temples have given institutional recognition of identity (increasing political visibility by 72%), but the Hindu-Buddhist style of architecture has been copied (in 78% of cases). The timing of traditional rituals has been shortened—for example, in Larumba, the puja has been reduced from 2 hours to 20 minutes. Tourism brings 30-60% of the temple budget, while 85% of the state's investment

is linked to the electoral cycle. The diaspora has shown love for the motherland by contributing 40%.

The article suggests three: (1) the Manghims should have symbols such as Suptulung or Silam-Sakma, (2) the shaman/Nakchong should have an obligatory presence, (3) the shrines should be protected from commercialization.

Keywords: Manghim, Mangkhim, Limbu, Rai, Kirat, Suptulung, Silam-Sakma

1. Introduction

The Rai, Limbu, Yakkha, and Sunuwar ethnics tribes constitute the Kirat people with their own anti-establishment Mundhum religion, relying on nature and worship, oral customs, and shamanistic forms of worship (Gaenszle, 2011).

Kirat spirituality never had a fixed place and instead wild areas were the temples i.e. forest, rivers, and hearths (Woodhatch, 2002). Recent years have witnessed quick development of large-scale Manghim temples, such as the nine-story Yuma Manghim in Dhankuta with a budget of NPR 90 million.

- Ilam's Larumba Ashram is a pilgrimage and cultural complex, while Bhojpur's Dimalung Memorial Park is a province-funded heritage site (Rising Nepal, 2024; Radionepalonlines, 2023).

This trend raises important questions:

(i). Do these temples maintain Kirat identity or impose foreign religious structures?

(ii). How does tourist-driven development affect religious architecture?

(iii). What are the political and economic motives for state-sponsored temple projects?

2. Kirat Spiritual Traditions: Nature as Sacred Space

Traditional Mundhum worship takes place in open-air settings, with significant features:

- Suptulung (tri-stone hearth): An ancestral lineage sign (Gaenszle, 2011)
- Chulla (holy fire) is central to shamanic ceremonies.
- Ban-Jhankri (forest spirits) are worshiped in groves, not temples.

Critics contend that current Manghim designs emulate Hindu/Buddhist temple aesthetics, introducing idol worship and set rituals that contradict Mundhum's flexible traditions (Rai, 2023). For example, Dhankuta's Yuma Manghim employs tiered towers resembling a'shikhara' (Hindu temple spire) while avoiding traditional'suptulung' (Field notes, 2023).

3. The Rise of Manghim Temples: Four Driving Forces

3.1 Identity Politics

Following the 2015 constitution, ethnic groups desire cultural recognition. Temples act as geographical markers against Hindu dominance (Lawoti, 2020).

3.2 Tourism Economics

Case Study: Larumba Ashram in Ilam.

Marketed as a Kirat Heritage Village and a guest house and cultural performance spot. - 30 percent of the people are tourists (Koshi Tourism Board, 2023).

Criticians argue that the commercialization process turns rituals into dramatic shows (Tamang, 2022).

3.3 Diaspora funding.

The Limbu diaspora in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom sponsors temple construction in order to maintain visible ties to their motherland (Subba, 2021).

3.4 State Legitimation

Provincial governments support projects such as Dimalung Park to garner ethnic votes (Radionepalonline, 2023).

4. Scholarly Critiques: Risks of Institutionalization

(i). Ritual Standardization: Fixed temple rituals could replace localized shamanic traditions (Gaenszle, 2022).

(ii). Orality Erosion: Written Manghim texts have the potential to impair Mundhum's oral transmission (Rai, 2023).

(iii). Environmental Disconnect: Concrete structures conflict with nature-based devotion (Field notes, 2024).

5. Methodology

- Ethnography: Ilam, Dhankuta and Bhojpur

- Stakeholder interviews (35 shamans, architects and politicians).
- Archival Research Government Budgets and tourism Reports.

6. Tourism and Temple Commodification

6.1 The "Disneyfication" of Kirat Rituals

Every day there are abridged Mundhum chanting as a part of the daily routine of the tourists, which interfere with the sacred rhythms of the place at Larumba Ashram. A shaman interviewed expressed frustration: "They ask me to finish a two-hour ritual in 20 minutes for visitors." "This kills the spirit."

- Projected revenue of NPR 5 million per year from entry fees (Dhankuta Municipality, 2024)

- Controversy: 60% of expenditures are directed to souvenir stores vs ritual areas (Ibid.) (Field interview, 2023).

6.2 Case Study: Yuma Manghim, Dhankuta

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7. Political Economy of Temple Construction

7.1 Federal Funding and Ethnic Patronage

Koshi Province's NPR 25 million donation to Dimalung Park coincided with local elections (Radionepalonline, 2023).

7.2 Land Conflicts

Farmers in Bhojpur protested temple land acquisition, which they described as "development displacement" (The Kathmandu Post, 2023).

8. Gender and Generational Shifts

- Decline of Female Shamans: 3 of 15 Manghim priests interviewed were female (Field notes, 2024).

- This is because the younger generation of Urban Kiratis would rather go to a temple on a photo shoot trip, than oral learning of Mundhum (Rai, 2023).

9. Environmental Price tags against cultural benefits

Yuma Manghim in Dhankuta has destroyed 2.5 hectares of forest land in contravention of Kirat eco-spirituality (Gaenszle, 2022).

Alternatives: There are other tribes that build up bamboo and open air shaped eco-Manghims (Subba, 2021)..

10. Toward Hybrid Solutions?

Proposed models that balance tradition and modernity:

(i). Ritual-Centric Design: Prioritize'suptulung' and fire areas over idol chambers.

(ii). Community Governance: Shamans work together to manage temples and avoid commercialization.

(iii). Digital Mundhum Archives: Preserve oral histories with physical constructions.

In the study, there are three concepts that need management in a subgroup-specific manner, such as Limbu sacred architecture. Whereas Rai villages embrace the'suptulung' hearth (Gaenszle, 2011, p. 47), Limbu tradition is all about the Silam-sakma monoliths the pillars of stone built vertically to mark the relationship with the ancestors (Subba, 2018, p. 112). This needs a new adaptation:

10.1 Culturally Adaptive Hybrid Designs

In the case of the Rai-affiliated Manghims, keep the ritual core of the system, that is, suptulung (Chemjong, 2022, p. 89).

The Limbu community of Dhankuta region has some special traditions related to the last rites. According to the researchers, here the dead body is peacefully displayed in the open courtyard for some time. The practice of showing dead bodies thus gives the village community time to pay homage and provides an opportunity to bid farewell to the soul of the deceased (Mukarung, 2023).

Along with this end rites, there is also a tradition of erecting 3 to 5 natural stones in the Limbu tradition. These stones are not idols of any kind, but forms made by nature, which are kept as religious and cultural symbols (Mukarung, 2023, p. 14). It refers to reverence for nature and remembrance of ancestors.

Similarly, in 'Yuma' communities, an open floor should be available for offering beverages (such as rice wine) during worship or ritual. The main reason for doing this is to consider the earth to be a means of

worship. It is on this belief that open and clean land is preferred over covered spaces (Subba, 2018, p. 115).

All these practices show that Kirat religions and rites are still deeply intertwined with nature, ancestors and communities. In the midst of modern changes, such practices are playing an important role in preserving cultural roots.

10.2. Subgroup Ritual Governance

Limbu temples are to establish 3-5 ordained Phedangba/ma priest based 3-5 'Phedang Councils' (Subba, 2018, p. 203).

- Gender-balanced representation (currently only 22% female involvement according to Koshi Province data).
- Youth observers for intergenerational transmission.

10.3 Universal Non-Commercial Protections

- Inner sanctums (minimum 40% of site area) are identified as:
- Camera-free zones (enforced through local legislation).
- Vending areas are prohibited during significant ceremonies (Udhauli, Ubhauli).

11. Symbols clarified through theoretical integration

The difference between Rai'suptulung' and Limbu 'Silam-sakma' demonstrates ecological adaptability, not spiritual divergence (Mukarung, 2023, p.17). This

supports van der Veer's (2015) idea of "grounded pluralism" in indigenous sacred architecture (p. 144).

The study gives two important insights into Kirat religious architecture:

11.1 Subgroup Variations as Ecological Adaptations

Rai: Suptulung Hearths.

Rai people used Suptulung or three cornered stone hearths to illustrate their agro-pastoral culture. Such fires are suitable with mountain towns at an altitude of 1,500-2500 m where people need fire to keep them warm and cook. They are also mobile in design and this fits well into Rai semi-nomadic nature where people would move freely between seasonal villages and yet preserve their rituals (Gaenszle, 2011, p. 48).

Limbu: Silam-Sakma.

The Limbus in contrast use Silam-Sakma that are vertical monoliths or ritual structures which are often diamond like in form. They are either bamboo, wood, or yarn and they are in color red, white, and blue. The structure of diamond is created in the center outwards, consuming up to nine layers which are highly rotated. Stick or the axis of a cross in the middle symbolizes defense and overcoming of disease and catastrophe.

These buildings are mostly observed in river valley settlement within a height of 800-1500 meters. In contrast to movable Rai hearths, Silam-Sakma are

often applied as stationary symbols to indicate the presence of locals and the spirit (Subba, 2018, p. 114).

The customs show the same content related to ceremony, regardless of the fact that they are different in appearance and functionality. Actually, the 92 per cent of the rituals of invoking a deity are similar and both societies offer the same products to their respective deities- un-milled rice and homemade alcohol.

11.2 Theoretical confirmation: Grounded Pluralism.

The theory of Van der Veer (2015), which consists of grounded Pluralist ideas, assists in defining the divergences in the approaches used by different tribes, including Rai and Limbu, to their rituals. They, although different, share rather powerful foundations on local environment and common cosmological principles.

In practice, the selection of ritual stones is influenced by local geography. For example, the Rai commonly employ river-smoothed quartzite, whereas the Limbu prefer raw, unshaped metamorphic slabs. These decisions reflect what is naturally accessible in each region—a form of material pragmatism formed by the earth itself.

However, when it comes to employing varying substances, the two organisations are quite consistent with their approach to spiritual concepts. They orientate their holy structures towards the dawn

according to a 15-degree angle. Both do not make use of metal tools in order to establish rituals sites, which is probably because of spiritual taboos. Both tribes carry out a three-day cleansing procedure before any sacred object is erected and this shows that they both share a common ritual purity and readiness.

Such common features exist not only at the level of theory but also rest on statistics. DARN (2022) found out that approximately 78 percent of ritual sites that were established prior to 1800 CE meet contemporary ecological criteria. Moreover, linguistic texts of Mundhum chants show that the similar metaphor (describing the stone as the bone of the earth) is used by both the Rai and Limbu lineages. Even though this poetic language differs in terms of ritual elaboration, it supports the idea of a shared cosmology- aid no to concrete.

12. Recommendations and points of improvement:

- It should be designed according to the local environment, which supports ecological balance. E.g., planning appropriately according to height.
- Using materials found there (things available locally).
- The same rules regarding ritual (ritual) should be preached verbally so that everyone understands and obeys. Example: Tell others the traditional rituals learned from ancestors.
- Seasonal festivals and rituals should be scheduled, so that everyone can worship at the right time.

Example: To schedule the year-round rituals in what month.

13. Conclusion

The major objectives of this study is to answer three main research questions on the cultural, political, and economic factors that went into building the Kirat Manghim temples in Nepal.

1. Temple: Does it keep our identity or ruin our traditions?

Manghim temples have made the Kirat community more visible in politics and culture. Yuma Manghim Temple in Dhankuta is an example of a temple that shows ethnic pride. But instead of old customs based on nature, new ones focused on enormous towers and idol worship have started to appear. This could hurt the spirit of Kirat Mundhum.

In conclusion, temples strengthen political identification but weaken spiritual depth.

2. Tourism: a drop in money or a drop in ritual?

The temples have made money from tourism. For instance, tourism makes from 30% to 60% of the budget for the Larumba Ashram and Yuma Manghim in Dhankuta. But because of this, rites have been cut short, and holy words have turned into "programs." The "Kirat brand" is also limiting the variety of Mundhum.

In conclusion, there is a risk of losing cultural uniqueness in the rush to get money.

3. Building Temples: The Role of Politics and the Diaspora

After federation, the provinces constructed shrines to honour their ethnic history. The Dimalung Park was built with money from Koshi Province. The Limbu community that lives overseas is also putting money into temples, which shows how they feel about their home country.

But occasionally these attempts turn into a "project" instead of a local custom. Farmers in Bhojpur complained when the land was taken away for the temple. This indicates that progress can have an effect on the people who live there.

In conclusion, temples are now part of more than just religious networks; they are now part of political and economic networks.

4. A balanced approach is the way to a solution.

Here are three ideas about how to fix these issues:

1. *Natural and traditional temple design:* Building open temples with suptulung stoves, silam-sakma, and other natural materials. The design of the temple should be developed in accordance with the guidance of shamans, subject matter experts, cultural scholars, and architects.

2. creating sure shamans have a say: Shamans who know the rituals should be in charge of creating rules and leading rituals in the temple.

3. Limiting professionalism: Don't turn the temple into a business and don't let too many tourists come during sacred times.

In the end, this is an awakening of culture and a great contradiction as the big temples of Manghim are being raised in Nepal. These are buildings, representing Kirat identity amidst the Hindu and Buddhist majority and thus, they may alter the traditions they are supposed to preserve. Perhaps, the towers made out of concrete, stalls in the market, and conventions will replace the spirituality created by the earth, the atmosphere, and family background.

When it comes to money and interest, tourism comes with it, however, tourism also tends to kill the authenticity of a location. Due to the politics and nostalgia to the past; holy places has been synonymous to pride and in certain cases there is no soul. The spiritual centre gets thinner when the money that sponsors it brings the beautiful over the ecological and shortens some practices toward presentation of the stage performance.

There also has to be a combination of approaches to progress in a responsible manner. We need temples that are connected to the land, rituals led by shamans instead of schedules, and protections that see sacred

time and space as valuable, not as a way to make money.

A strong voice for Kirat rights said, *"We need deep roots, not high temples."* That is the call and the test of real culture revival.

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